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The Merit System and The New Democratic Party

Address by

President Charles W. Eliot

President of the National Civil Service
Reform League

Delivered at the Thirty-second Annual Meeting
of the

NATIONAL CIVIL SERVICE REFORM LEAGUE

At MILWAUKEE, WIS.

December 5, 1912

PUBLISHED FOR THE
NATIONAL CIVIL SERVICE REFORM LEAGUE,
79 WALL STREET, NEW YORK.
1913.

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The Merit System and The New Democratic Party

CHARLES W. ELIOT, PRESIDENT OF THE LEAGUE.

The National Civil Service Reform League meets this year under circumstances of unusual interest. After an interval of sixteen years the Democratic party is again coming into power, and is to take over from the Republican party control of the entire national civil service.

What policy in regard to the merit system will the Democratic Congress and Administration think it for their interest and the interest of the country to pursue?

The merit system, as it now exists, is by no means the creation of the Republican party alone. George H. Pendleton of Ohio, author of the early bill which bore his name, was a Democrat. President Cleveland was a civil service reformer through all his public career. When Governor, he signed the New York law of 1883. His first message as President contained a strong statement on behalf of civil service reform. In his first term he made large extensions of the classified service, and took measures to prevent political activity on the part of civil servants appointed under the merit system. During his second term he again made important additions to the classified service, and included among civil servants to be appointed on the merit system chief clerks and chiefs of division in the Washington bureaus, thus reaching the limit imposed by the Constitution and the laws that make all higher appointments than those subject to confirmation by the Senate. He made the most sweeping extensions of the merit system made by any President of the United States up to that date, repeatedly declared his faith in civil service reform, and held that faith to the very end of his administration.

President McKinley always regarded himself as a civil service reformer; but he apparently thought that President Cleveland's extensions of the merit system had been too sweeping for the immediate convenience of the Republican party, so that he gave back to the patronage system several thousand places which President Cleveland had put on the merit system. Among these places restored to patronage were several of the higher kinds of office. President Roosevelt and President Taft both believed in the merit system as promoting honesty and efficiency in the national administration, and both made important extensions of the classified service. President Roosevelt put into the classified service fourth-class postmasters east of the Mississippi and north of the Potomac and Ohio; and President Taft has recently added all the rest of the fourth-class postmasters. President Taft has also ordered that assistant postmasters shall be selected on the merit system; and this order will have wide and lasting effects, because postmasters ought to be promoted, as a rule, from among the assistant postmasters, as the postmaster of New York has already been. Moreover, all the lower grades of the post office service will be favorably affected by the opening of the assistant postmasterships to persons who prove their merit in the lower grades of the post office service. President Taft's act has made it possible—for the first time in the history of the post office department—for a young, ambitious, and capable American to enter the postal service at the bottom with the stimulating hope in his heart of rising by merit to an assistant postmastership, and with a glimpse of the highest posts in the department beyond, not, as now, wholly impossible of attainment. So long as the highest posts in the civil service are inaccessible from below to persons of proved merit, so long competent young men will not care to enter the lower grades, or, if they enter them for temporary purposes, they will soon quit the service. Every career open to merit is the fundamental principle of effective organization, whether civil or military. Through

two Democratic and all the Republican administrations since President Cleveland's first term Congress has made the necessary appropriations for maintaining the National Civil Service Commission—not always willingly, sometimes grudgingly; and yet the merit system has been maintained for the lower grades of the national service and has been gradually, though not steadily, extended.

This League at its annual meeting has usually recorded with joy some advance of the reform, and also the defeat, through its influence, of attacks on the merit system, made sometimes in Congress, sometimes in administrative departments of the government. That sort of record we have to make today. We welcome some improvements effected during the year 1912, but also have to accept the fact that several attacks on the merit system, made in Congress, were defeated with difficulty, and that one such attack, originating in the Senate, succeeded in spite of the protests of the United States Civil Service Commission and of this League.

President Cleveland and his Republican successors have been friends of the merit system, and have helped forward this most fundamental of all reforms; but all have made use of the higher civil service offices, which are still filled by the patronage method, to further the supposed interests of their respective parties, and to procure the passage through Congress of measures which they had at heart; and all have used the patronage officeholders to pack and dominate party committees, caucuses, and conventions. All these Presidents without exception have made appointments for political purposes. They have appointed men to office who never could have met any reasonable test of merit or fitness; and all have made appointments by Executive order of persons who had to be specially exempted from the operation of the rules governing the classified service, that is, the service filled by appointment for proved merit. In other words, neither Congress nor the Presidents have adhered consistently to the fundamental principles of the merit system; and both

Congress and the administration have from time to time interfered with the application of, or violated the rules of the merit system, even in those grades of the service to which the rules are applicable by law.

In the meantime, a tremendous change in public opinion has been going on throughout the country concerning the reform which this League has advocated for thirty-three years. The mass of the voters in the United States accepted for a long time the spoils doctrine as reasonable and under the circumstances inevitable. Public opinion was tolerant of sweeping changes in the civil service whenever the party in power was displaced by a new election, and of the inefficiency and waste which resulted from frequent changes in the entire civil service of the country. The public did not understand how the increasing complexity of the work of the federal administration made rotation in office the source of increasing waste and loss for the government and the people. For many years the public looked with equanimity upon the spectacle of national officeholders giving their time and thought to party work, or to the service of the men to whom they owed their places. The machine and boss were supported from the salaries of the public offices which had been filled through their agency, and from assessments levied on candidates for office, and on persons or corporations whom the machines and bosses had helped to money from the public treasury through legislative or administrative favor. Gradually the American public has been aroused from their indifferent or apathetic attitude towards a great moral and material evil, and has begun to pay attention to the losses and wastes the nation suffers through the incompetency and inefficiency of civil servants selected without adequate tests, appointed by personal favor or for party service, and under allegiance not to the national service but to a personal or party patron.

The signs of this change in public opinion are numerous; and yet many of them seem to have escaped the attention of the active politicians of both parties. The mass

of the people today would look with disgust and apprehension on a sweeping change throughout the national offices on the incoming of a new party or a new administration. For instance, the business men of the country, whether importers or exporters, would look with extreme disfavor upon a sweeping change in the consular offices of the United States throughout the world. Business men now regard consuls as agents for building up the foreign trade of the United States; and they are well aware that a consul is ordinarily valuable in proportion to the length of his service, and to the means of communication he has acquired with the people among whom he lives. It would be rash for the Democratic party, now coming into power, to interfere with, or abandon, the half-way merit system introduced into the consular service by the Executive orders of Presidents Roosevelt and Taft; for that system, though not thorough or complete, has built up the morale of the service, and led to the employment of a much better class of men than formerly sought the consulships. The business interests of the country have been better served by the consuls appointed on examination than ever before, although the new rules rest on Executive orders only and not on statutes. The improvement in the service has been so great within the last twelve years, and its results have been so favorably regarded by all the American chambers of commerce and trade organizations, that wholesale ejection of the present consuls from office, and their replacement by inexperienced political appointees would seem to be out of the question.

The general sentiment of the public has changed strikingly with regard to the value of experience in the incumbents of the higher national offices. The people now believe that experienced, expert men should be employed as heads of all the government establishments, that is, in collectorships, deputy collectorships, postmasterships, and marshalships. In all the great manufacturing and transportation industries of the country the people see superintendents and managers selected with the greatest care and

kept in office as long as possible. The people see that every complicated business into which applied science enters largely as a factor needs the services of men selected for fitness and merit, trained and developed by experience, and devoted to the business with a full sense of security and honor in their places. They perceive that the business of the government is extremely complicated in its higher departments, hard to learn completely, and needing the same faithful and continuous service which private enterprises profit by and reward.

Within the past fifteen years the civil services of the states and cities of the Union have attracted a great deal of public attention and great improvements have already been made in many of them. With the exception of the national letter carrier service, these local services are nearer to the people than the national service; and the improvements already effected therein have been more instructive to the public than those in the national service. Everybody knows nowadays that teachers, firemen, and policemen should be selected and promoted on the merit system, kept in office during good behavior and efficiency, and pensioned on disability. Some of the states and cities have applied the merit system to offices of high grade; whereas in the national service that system is applied only to comparatively subordinate places. The wide adoption of the commission form of government for cities affords a good illustration of the change that has taken place in the public mind concerning the advantages of the merit system over the patronage system of appointment. It is of the essence of the commission form of government that a small body shall be elected by popular vote to determine the general policies of the city, and to select and appoint competent experts as the executive heads of the various city departments. The commissions elected in cities of fair size have been expected to procure for the administrative work of the cities civil servants selected for merit and kept in office during good behavior and efficiency. The people have seen many instances of the su-

periority of this method of getting a city's work done to the former method of trying to accomplish it through inexperienced and unfit men elected by popular vote, or appointed by an incompetent and unstable authority. The recent great majority in Ohio for putting the merit system into the state constitution is a striking indication of the trend of public opinion in favor of civil service reform. It seems likely that the political opportunists and "ear to the ground" thinkers will be able to hear the heavy tramp of that procession.

Still another influence has affected the public mind in regard to the expediency of selecting public officials with care, and then retaining them for long service. Within the past ten or fifteen years there has been manifested a greatly increased desire for liberal expenditures of public money to promote the security and health, and the enjoyments of the less fortunate classes of the population. The rich, the poor, and the great middle class who are neither rich nor poor, all alike feel this desire, and all alike see clearly, as the result of recent experiences, that the desired expenditures cannot be made, if incompetent and inefficient managers and agents are allowed to expend the money raised by taxation. The wastes and losses of inefficient administration are so great, that when the most pressing needs of the community have been in some measure met, such as roads, water-supplies, sewers, schools, fire protection, courts, and police, there will be little or nothing left for the newer departments of expenditure which are so earnestly called for. Good city and town administration is therefore demanded, in order that there may be money to spend on the new social undertakings which the most enlightened and the least enlightened portions of the public alike long for. The great philanthropic movement of society in recent years reinforces civil service reform, calls loudly for the merit system throughout the public service, and demands expert service during good behavior and efficiency in all the public administrative offices of city, state, and nation.

Again, the public is no longer tolerant of the appearance of officeholders in the management of political committees, caucuses, and conventions. The recent Presidential campaign has made this fact very clear. It is no longer an advantage to the party in power to use its patronage officeholders in this way. On the contrary, it is an element of weakness for any candidate that his nomination has been procured through what President Cleveland called the pernicious political activity of patronage officeholders. The Republican party, which had been in power for sixteen years, using to the full its patronage officeholders as political managers, has just been overwhelmingly defeated by two parties which had no such officeholders to use. The people as a whole showed very plainly in this campaign their dislike and distrust of political management by the officeholders, the bosses, and the machines, all of which agencies are supported out of the salaries of patronage officeholders and the assessments levied on persons who have obtained, or hope to obtain, through party agencies, illegitimate favors. Is it not perfectly clear that the American people through all their party divisions wish to have an end put to the political activity of officeholders? Now the only way to accomplish that end is to do away with the patronage system of appointment throughout the government service. So long as government officials owe their positions to a patron, they will work for that patron. Fill all government offices on the merit system through careful original selections and careful promotion, and no civil servant will have any patron to serve. Require all civil servants to abstain from partisan political activity, and there will be no officeholders' management of either nominations or elections.

For the first time in the history of civil service reform, a President of the United States has recommended that all the national offices be filled on the merit system, except, of course, elective offices, cabinet offices, and the assistantships attached to cabinet offices. To this recommendation of President Taft the present Congress has paid no

attention, thus showing either that the Senators and the members of the House of Representatives are not willing to give up the patronage they have improperly acquired and do not understand the great change in public opinion concerning the civil service which has already taken place, or that, understanding that change, they propose to fight for their patronage as necessary to the support of expedient party activities or of their own political fortunes.

The illegitimate practice of distributing among the Senators and Representatives the patronage of the higher civil offices, a practice which has deprived the President of his constitutional power over appointments, now blocks the progress of civil service reform; and it is for public opinion to insist strenuously on the abolition of that practice, and the restoration to the President of his legitimate appointing power. Whatever intrenchments defend that practice should now be stormed by public opinion. Senators and Representatives now select, nominate and appoint, and the President confirms. We should return to the constitutional order, which is the very reverse of present practice.

The Democratic party, soon coming into power, has a precious opportunity to instal itself in the favorable regard of many millions of intelligent and patriotic Americans without distinction of party. It can turn back from the capitol the horde of hungry Democratic officeseekers that will inevitably muster there. It can refuse to turn out competent and faithful officials in the higher civil service, although they were in many cases Republican patronage appointees. It can refuse to disturb consuls selected by the half-way merit system set up by the Executive orders of Presidents Roosevelt and Taft, and replace those orders by a thorough-going statute. It can prevent all officeholders from rendering political party service. It can show by its actions that it does not believe that any party advantage can be gained through the patronage method of appointment to public offices, and that it recognizes the rightful demand of the people for the maintenance and

extension of the merit system. This League will watch with vigilance and the keenest interest the action concerning civil service reform about to be taken by the Democratic party under its new leaders, believing that action to be more important to the Democratic party and to the country than the party action on the tariff, banking and currency, the foreign policies, or the treatment of insular possessions, and more likely to determine the destiny of the Democratic party for the next eight years than any other public policy. The reason for this predominance of civil service reform over all other political issues is, that that reform touches intimately every other governmental improvement, and affects profoundly the morality and efficiency of American citizenship.

The League is to be congratulated that convincing demonstrations have been given all over the country by numerous civil service commissions that good candidates can always be selected by the method of examination and inquiry for civil offices of all sorts and all grades, the highest as well as the lowest. For many years after the introduction of the merit system the method of examination was ridiculed by practical politicians and other persons interested in the perpetuation of the spoils system. Civil service reformers were declared to be theorists, visionaries, academic persons without any acquaintance with practical affairs, and the method of examination was declared wholly inapplicable to the selection of government employees, educated or uneducated, skilled or unskilled. Even the bosses and the machines have now given up this line of argument. They have discovered that the civil service reformers have advocated successfully the only perfect means of destroying the patronage method of appointment, and with it the resources of political bosses and machines. They have learned that the merit system is the only practical, business-like method of selecting, developing, and promoting the officials of any government which has modern business to do, national, state, or municipal; and they are beginning to see that the sound busi-

ness opinion of the country is overwhelmingly on the side of the reform which the politicians used to denounce as visionary and unpractical. The state and city commissions have contributed greatly to the demonstration that the method of examination and inquiry into training and experience is applicable to candidates for the highest civil offices and in the most expert administrative services. The Federal Commission has also contributed to this demonstration, but not so much as the state and city commissions; because the immense majority of offices in the classified service of the United States are subordinate positions. Combining the achievements of the Federal Commission with those of Kansas City, Cook County, Illinois, New York State and city, Buffalo, Philadelphia, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Massachusetts, abundant proof has been given that architects, chemists, engineers of all sorts, road builders, accountants, pathologists, foresters, superintendents of Indian Reservations, statisticians of all kinds, heads of fire departments, and penal and charitable institutions, superintendents of hospitals and asylums, commissioners of public works, health commissioners, police superintendents, fire marshals, and librarians can all be wisely selected by the method of examination and investigation, and that the efficiency of the civil service can be indefinitely increased by following exclusively this method of selection and appointment. In short, the methods of selection and appointment advocated by this League have proved to be completely feasible, and to lead straight to all the anticipated improvements in the civil service of the country. Whoever now asks that a candidate for office be exempted from examination and inquiry on the competitive merit system is either ignorant of the above facts, or untrustworthy in his support of the merit system.

An intelligent and ambitious young man choosing a career for life wishes not only to obtain a first appointment by giving evidences of merit and capacity, but then to see before him a just method of promotion and a fairly secure tenure of office, if he prove himself competent and

faithful. Thorough civil service reform, therefore, includes the provision of a just and careful method of promotion, and of a fair tenure of office for officials of proved capacity. This League, through committees, has already given much attention to the establishment of a sound system of promotion in the national civil service, but sees the necessity of continuing the diligent study of that subject, and of promoting judicious experiments thereon.

A pension system for employees of long service is a desirable and economical part of any large administrative and executive organization; and this League has, through committees, given much attention to the study of an appropriate pension system for employees of the national government. Although several bills on this subject have been brought before Congress, no action has yet been taken; and while this League continues to be interested in the subject, it is not urging any action upon Congress in this matter, although it has expressed a preference for a contributory system of pensions to a system of direct pensions. There are peculiar difficulties in the way of establishing a sound pension system for the civil employees of the national government. For instance, Congress provides for the payment of so many salaries in each of several grades of service in the government bureaus at Washington. If a vacancy occurs in any one of the grades, it must be immediately filled in the same grade, so that the total number of salaries in that grade shall be expended as appropriated. It is not possible to omit filling that particular vacancy, and to get the work of the former incumbent done by an official of a lower grade. Therefore, whatever amount is spent by the United States for pensions will be a clean addition to the amount of salaries provided for in the appropriation bills. Accordingly, no economic use of pensions for promoting the efficiency of the total system is possible. A university or a railroad can provide a pension for a retiring official, and diminish for a time the total salary-list by the amount of that pension, or by some considerable fraction of that amount; and this is

the method which any judicious administration would follow in pensioning employees. For the present, a pension system cannot be economically applied in the civil service of the United States.

An intelligently devised pension system increases the efficiency of the corps or staff, to which it is applied, by removing superannuated persons, and making promotion quicker throughout the corps or staff. The superannuation evil is not, however, serious as yet in the civil service of the United States, because the number of old employees is small, and most of the persons who are approaching what would be the age of retirement in a sound organization are either in low-salaried places, or were spoils appointees. To continue some low salaries beyond the age when they are really earned will not bring a heavy charge upon the government; and as to spoils appointees, the government is, of course, under no obligation whatever to them in regard to a provision for disability or old age. The League, therefore, will bring no pressure to bear upon the government for the immediate adoption of any pension system whatever, and inclines to the belief that legislation on that subject needs further consideration. Whenever the higher offices in the national civil service shall be filled on the merit system, the interest of the League in the pension system will become keen. The indispensable preliminary conditions of a sound pension system are original selection for merit and promise, a reasonable probation, promotion for merit proved, and long service.

The League congratulates itself on the strength throughout the country of the movement in favor of the commission form of government in cities, and of the movement in favor of a short ballot, and welcomes with the utmost cordiality the strong support which both these movements bring to the cause of civil service reform.

Finally, this National League greets and thanks all the state and municipal societies which are associated with it as supporters and colaborers, and congratulates them on the striking progress of the fundamental reform to which

it and they are alike devoted. And we, the living advocates of this great moral reform, cherish in our hearts to-night the names of the pioneers who bore the burden of the earlier conflicts. We think gratefully of Jencks, Pendleton, Eaton, Curtis, Burt, Schurz, and Gilman, and of their noble leadership in times more difficult than ours. We say thankfully of their labors and our own—the end is not yet, but it draws near.



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